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ABSTRACT

A project undertaken at Macquarie University's National Centre for Language Teaching and Research (Australia) focuses on the literacy development of adult learners from non-English speaking backgrounds. The project draws on systemic-functional linguistics and work in literacy that derives from this theory. Systemic linguistics provides a theory of language that focuses on how language functions and the resources available in the lexico-grammatical systems of language can be utilized to make meaning. The program description begins with an outline of the theory and its model of language, and presents some points relevant to the literacy project. Issues emerging from the project that are relevant to literacy development include the following: The importance of the kinds of texts presented to students; the significance of the relationship between spoken and written language; the role of the teacher in relation to explicit teaching; effective provision of information to students; task-based syllabus design and learner-centered curriculum; and independent learning. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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JENNIFER HAMMOND

The NCELTR Literacy Project

One of the projects being undertaken by the new National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR), located at Macquarie University, focuses on the literacy development of adult learners from non-English speaking backgrounds within the AMEP. This project aims to build on some of the work already done as part of the National Curriculum Project (NCP), co-ordinated by David Nunan and Jill Burton, within the AMEP during 1987 and 1988, especially the work in the NCP Framework, *Beginning Reading and Writing*. It also builds on some of the productive work done in the schools' context in recent years; this draws on systemic linguistics and the notions of register and genre. The project has been designed as a pilot project which can provide a useful basis for a focus on literacy throughout the AMEP during 1990, the International Literacy Year.

Theoretical Background to the Project

The project draws on systemic-functional linguistics, developed by Halliday and others (e.g. Halliday 1978, 1985; Halliday and Hasan 1976) and the work in literacy that derives from this theory, especially that of Martin and Rothery (1980, 1981) and Christie (1984, 1985). Systemic linguistics provides a theory of language that takes as its starting point a focus on how language functions and how the resources available in the lexico-grammatical systems of language can be utilised to make meaning.

It is a theory of language in context, and it argues that language can only be understood in relation to the context in which it is used. It is also a theory which emphasises language at the level of whole text. In this way it has a different approach from most other studies of language, notably that of traditional grammar, which offer a systematic study of language only up to sentence level and thus offer little guidance to the language learner who needs to know about structure, organisation and development in connected oral discourse and written texts. A diagrammatic summary of the systemic-functional model of language is presented in *Figure 1*.

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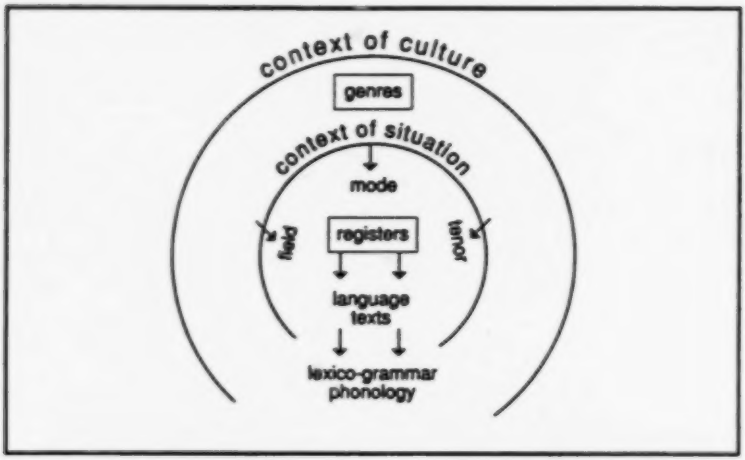
FIGURE 1. ***Summary of the systemic-functional model of language (after Derewianka 1988)***



In this model, the outer circle represents the context of culture, incorporating the attitudes, values and shared experiences of any group of people living in the one culture. It includes expectations of ways of behaving and of how things get done in daily life. Within each culture, ways of getting things done or ways of going about achieving common goals or purposes in life have evolved. These are the different genres that are referred to in the diagram above. Examples of genres include service encounters, ordering meals in restaurants, recounting the day's events, telling stories, writing stories, arguing a point of view. Each involves, in one way or another, the use of language, and each results in a different text type, or genre. Each genre is distinguished by a distinctive schematic structure – that is, a distinctive sequence of beginning, middle and end stages which enable the overall purpose of the genre to be realised. Each culture has evolved its own ways of going about doing things, and thus there may be considerable variation of genres from one culture to another.

Any use of language also takes place within a particular context of situation – that is, it occurs within a particular time and geographic location, between specific people or groups of people. The context of situation is represented on the diagram by the inner circle, as each situation occurs within a specific culture. The language that is used within any context of situation will be determined by a number of contextual variables, namely field, tenor and mode. *Field* refers to the social activity taking place at the time; it can be thought of as the topic under discussion. Examples of field could include cooking, playing cricket,

politics or linguistics. *Tenor* refers to the relationships between participants and the way those relationships influence choices in language. Relationships can be described in terms of power, affect and solidarity. The kind of relationship that exists between participants, or the kind of audience for whom a text is written, has a considerable impact on the kind of language that is used. *Mode* refers to the channel of linguistic communication. In its simplest form this means whether language is spoken or written. Mode is also influenced by distance of speaker or writer from the events being referred to and by distance of participants from each other.

These three contextual variables of field, tenor and mode determine language choices that are made in the construction of any text. They determine vocabulary choices (if you are talking about football, you choose lexical items that are from the field of football, such as scrum, kick, pass, tackle, etc.). They also affect grammatical choices (if you are writing a procedural text which provides information about how to do something, you choose imperatives with present tense; if you are writing an account of your trip to the mountains, you choose past tense, etc.). Thus knowledge of the context of situation enables one to predict the kind of choices that are made in different language registers. The resulting language texts reflect the context in which they are constructed and they cannot be interpreted independently of this context.

This very brief overview of the systemic-functional model of language serves to make a number of points that are relevant to the NCELTR literacy project:

As context of situation varies, so the language text that is produced varies

There is a direct relationship beween language and context. This means that in any language program the teacher needs to take into account the context in which a language interaction would typically occur. This applies to both oral and written language interactions. It also means that the purpose for using the language needs to be considered, as well as the way in which this purpose shapes the language texts produced. This is important with written texts, since writing, by its nature, is more easily analysed and reflected upon than speaking. One important implication of the language context-link is the necessity to focus on language at the level of whole texts, rather than at the level of sentence. That is, when developing literacy programs, the teacher needs to introduce students to whole written texts within an appropriate context of situation, to discuss the purpose of the text, to take account of the schematic structure of the text in discussions with the students and then, within the framework of this focus on whole texts, to focus on particular features of sentence construction, spelling and punctuation.

The model accounts for the language context-link in a systematic way

Although most language teachers intuitively recognise this link, the advantage of this model is that it explains how the link works in ways that enable us to predict the kind of language that will be used in any context. This in turn enables the analysis of distinctive features of language that occur in particular genres. Consequently the teaching of grammar becomes something that is functionally motivated; students learn features of sentence construction as they develop control of different genres. For example, they learn how tense varies with different genres, they learn the composition and function of nominal groups, and they learn the structure of clauses patterns in English and how meaning in the clause is changed depending on what comes first and last in the clause. They learn how these features of grammar contribute to the overall meaning of the texts that they are constructing.

For teachers this model not only offers an insight into how language functions, but also provides a means of evaluating their own and their students' use of language

Because it provides information about language use at the level of whole text, as well as at the level of sentence and clause, this model enables teachers to analyse and understand the linguistic demands being placed on students within the educational contexts in which they are operating. It also enables teachers to analyse and understand where the strengths and weaknesses lie in their students' use of language at the level of overall text organisation and structure, as well as at the level of sentence. The ability to analyse language demands and language use contributes to the development of effective teaching programs that facilitate effective spoken and written language development.

Participants in the Project

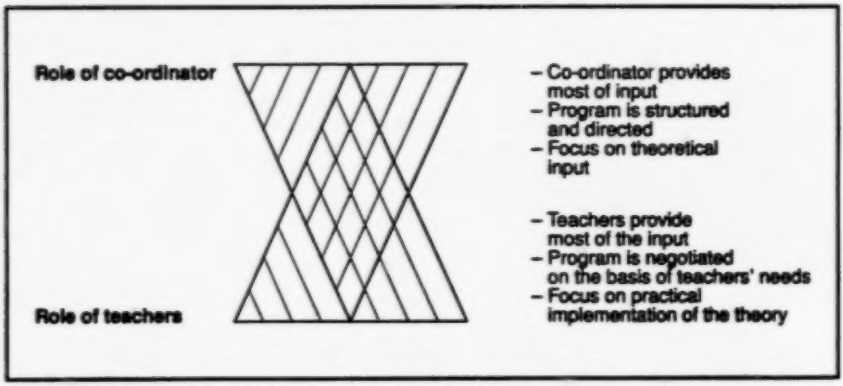
The participants in the NCELTR literacy project were two groups of approximately twenty teachers from Sydney and Brisbane. All participants in the project have been volunteers who were interested in literacy development and who saw the project as offering them assistance in their programming and teaching. Some teachers already had some familiarity with systemic linguistics through postgraduate work, conference attendance or their own reading. Others had had no exposure to systemic linguistics. The major criteria for participation were that teachers be enthusiastic and prepared to have ongoing commitment to the project. Participants met for two hours every fortnight for a period of seven months. The teachers involved represented the range of programs offered within the AMEP. Thus some were working with students who were preparing for entry into tertiary institutions or professional employment and who were already literate in their first and second languages, whereas

others were working with students who were attending beginning reading and writing classes and who frequently had minimal literacy development in their first as well as their second languages. The project has been co-ordinated overall by Jenny Hammond from NCELTR, and Adele Rice has co-ordinated the Brisbane section. An important feature of the project has been the support provided by the state AMES organisations in both Queensland and New South Wales.

Description of the Project

The project has consisted of cycles of theoretical input, action research, and data collection and finally will involve the writing of resource materials for the AMEP and for other teachers. *Figure 2* indicates organisation of the project.

FIGURE 2. ***The organisation of the NCELTR literacy project***


Role of co-ordinator
Role of teachers
– Co-ordinator provides most of input
– Program is structured and directed
– Focus on theoretical input
– Teachers provide most of the input
– Program is negotiated on the basis of teachers' needs
– Focus on practical implementation of the theory

As *Figure 2* indicates, the co-ordinator and teachers have had equally significant but different roles within the project. Initially much of the theoretical input was provided by the co-ordinator. This dealt with the

- systemic model of language;
- relationship between language and context;
- notions of genre and register;
- analysis of schematic structure and language features of different genres that AMEP learners need to write;
- relationship between spoken and written language;
- role of spoken and written language in education and implications of these roles for literacy development;
- overall implications of the systemic model of language for programming and teaching;
- appropriate curriculum cycles and teaching methodology for implementing the theory in the classroom.

During this input stage, the role of the teachers gradually increased as the group explored the educational implications of the various issues under discussion. The second half of the project was very much based on negotiated needs of the teachers as they began implementing the theory in their own classrooms. The fortnightly meetings thus provided a forum for sharing experiences, discussing and analysing successes and failures, and planning future teaching cycles. They provided a supportive forum for teachers to reflect on and discuss their own practice, sort out problems and compare their own approach with that taken by other people who were dealing with similar issues. Further theoretical input was provided when teachers identified needs. Thus the program itself became less directed and more open-ended. It increasingly became open to negotiation and organised around the expressed needs of the teachers as they discussed their own teaching programs and the effectiveness or otherwise of their attempts to implement the theory. It was through the teachers' attempts to come to terms with the practical implications of the theory that the action research phase of the project took place. Teachers reflected on and analysed their own teaching practice. They consciously experimented with different teaching activities and openly discussed and shared their experiences. Visits to classrooms by the co-ordinator and other teachers also provided support and opportunities for reflection and analysis of teaching practice.

During the action research phase, the teachers collected data in the form of recorded classroom discourse, photocopies of all the written texts produced by students during the recorded sessions, a copy of texts that the students read during these sessions and contextual notes detailing relevant information about what happened in each of the teaching episodes. Each teacher recorded a minimum of ten sessions. The data are being used as the basis for writing resource materials for AMES and other teachers during 1990.

Issues to Emerge from the Project

As the project progressed, a number of issues emerged as being particularly significant to literacy development within the AMEP. These are outlined below, and will be discussed in considerably more detail in a separate article in the next issue of *Prospect*.

Selection of genres

When working in the area of adult literacy, decisions about what kinds of texts, or what genres, students need to read and write are very difficult, as the range of possibilities is open-ended. In the school context such choices are constrained by the school curriculum, and although analysis of appropriate genres within the curriculum is not always easy, at least the choices are limited. In general reading and writing classes, the focus is on

'literacy for life', and the range of appropriate genres includes all possible written texts that exist within the culture. This makes decisions about what are appropriate genres for particular groups of learners very difficult.

The relationship between spoken and written language

In the context of the AMEP, spoken language development and written language development have frequently been taught separately. Participants in the project have been exploring both the way in which the two modes relate, and particularly the way in which spoken language supports literacy development. Discussions have focused on the nature of spoken and written modes of language, their similarities and differences and their roles in education. We have suggested that the role of spoken language in education is to provide opportunities for learners to discuss, infer, argue and negotiate. It is through such activities that learners build up their field of knowledge so that they are clear in their own minds about what it is that they want to write. The role of writing in education, we have suggested, is to clarify thoughts, record and pass on information and present thought-through arguments. Thus speaking plays a crucial role in preparation for writing. Conversely, in classes that focus primarily on spoken language development, it appears that teachers rely to a surprising extent on writing to support or extend the points that they are making. The whole issue of the relationship between spoken and written language is an important and complex one that needs to be examined more closely.

The role of the teacher in teaching

An issue which is running through the project, particularly in the implementation phase, is that of the role of the teacher in literacy programs. The kinds of questions that are being raised in the project include the following: How much explicit teaching should the teacher be doing? How does the teacher most effectively provide information for the students about the kinds of texts that they are attempting to read and write? How does the work being done as part of this project relate to a focus on task-based syllabus design and a learner-centred curriculum? Can a focus on explicit language teaching be compatible with the development of independent learners who take responsibility for their own learning?

Although this issue will form the basis of a separate article to appear in another edition of *Prospect*, it is perhaps worth briefly mentioning the direction of discussions relating to these sorts of questions. We have suggested that the role of the teacher is not an 'either/or' issue. That is, it is not the case that a teaching program needs to be either totally teacher-directed or totally learner-centred. At particular stages within a lesson or a teaching program it will be functional for the teacher to provide explicit teaching instruction and information for students. At such stages the classsroom will be teacher-directed. However, these 'teacher directions'

will ensure that students are clear about the purposes of the teaching program, so that when there is a shift to a learner-centred classroom they are able constructively to engage in learning tasks. The notion of shifting between a teacher-directed focus and a learner-centred focus within the teaching program assists in addressing questions about the role of the teachers. What is particularly important is that teachers have a clear idea of what they are doing and why, and in order to have such a clear view of teaching, they need to have a clear theory of language. ❑

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